

**Johanna Hanink, *The Classical Debt: Greek antiquity in the era of austerity*.**  
Harvard UP: 2017. ISBN 9780674971547. PP. xiv + 337 pp. 26 illustrations. USD 29.95.

This is an indignant book. It is also an important one, and written in an engaging and direct, often personal style. The author is a classical scholar who in 2014 and 2015 found herself confronted by the reality of life in Greece during the ongoing financial and social ‘crisis’. Ever since westerners with a training in classical culture first began travelling to the lands inhabited by the ancient Greeks (that is to say, for longer than the Greek nation-state has existed), each generation has experienced its own baptism of fire: the shock of the real confronting the ideal, of the present confronting the past, of lived experience bumping awkwardly against painstakingly acquired learning. For almost all who have gone through this particular trauma, some element of disillusionment has been involved. Almost always, the blame for this shattering of illusions has been laid at the door of the modern Greeks.

Johanna Hanink’s blast of indignation comes as a breath of fresh air – at last, perhaps, a positive bonus to emerge from 7 years of a Greek ‘crisis’ that seems to offer no way out. Here is a classical scholar brave enough to point the finger of blame somewhere else than at the impoverished, suffering Greeks. Perhaps it is not reality that is at fault, Hanink dares to ask? Perhaps, instead, it is the ideal against which most of the world (lazily, nowadays) measures that reality?

The target for Hanink’s indignation is what she calls Greece’s ‘captivity in the golden prison of a classical ideal’ (p. 7). There are three strands to this. Chapters 1, 6 and 7 add up to an extended opinion piece, charting, explaining and deconstructing the dominant representations of the current crisis, both in Greece and throughout the world’s media. These bookend four more historically based chapters. Chapter 2 takes the story all the way back to the ancient Athenians, who already by the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE had spun a myth of their own cultural supremacy that the gullible have been swallowing whole ever since. Chapters 3–5 focus on how Greeks in modern times got themselves into that ‘prison’: suckered during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries into allowing their nation-state in its formative stages to be ‘colonised’ by this same ideal, imposed on them by Europeans (and some Americans).

At the heart of the book lies a tale of two debts. One is the enormous debt in cash and bonds chalked up by Greek governments since the country’s credit rating was downgraded at the end of 2009, that led to three international bail-outs (in Greek, the infamous ‘memoranda’) of 2010, 2012 and 2015. The other is the no less enormous *cultural* debt owed collectively by ‘Western’ civilisation to the legacy of ancient Greece. Hanink is by no means the first to link these two debts or to suggest that they may in some sense be symmetrical. Not the least attractive aspect of this symmetry is that both are ultimately unrepayable. They are not really symmetrical either: even if it could be proved that Europe’s cultural ‘debt to Greece’ was knowingly incurred in counterfeit currency, it would still prove a weak argument in

persuading international bondholders to relinquish their claims on the Greek exchequer. Hanink has a better proposal, which is touching, if hardly more realistic: to envisage a future rescheduling of Europe's debt to Greece as one owed to the Greeks of today 'for the centuries of destruction that other people's dreams of the ancient past have wrought' (p. 271).

As might be expected of a book with such a visceral agenda, this one offers much to argue about. The framing chapters are rich in detail about cultural representations of Greece during the last few years, with much use of websites and social media, and often make a powerful argument. But the argument is sometimes diffused against too many targets. The book begins, and almost ends, with the controversy over the Parthenon sculptures (or 'Elgin Marbles'), and there is a lengthy excursus on the custodianship of ancient artifacts (pp. 255–64), which seems not quite to belong. The author quotes with seeming approval the famous claim, made by Melina Mercouri in 1986 while she was Minister of Culture, that the two-and-a-half-thousand-year-old sculptures are 'the essence of our Greekness' (p. 3). But the overall debunking of the 'classical ideal', as having been inappropriately foisted on the bearers of that 'Greekness' since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, surely also debunks the claim for repatriation *on those grounds*.

Chapter 2 ('How Athens built its brand') will no doubt raise eyebrows among classicists (of course, that is part of the point of the whole book). Yes, the Athenians manipulated history and were already nostalgic for better times in an implausibly glorified historical past. But there was more to ancient Greece than Athens (despite what Athenians claimed). Much of that brand-building was surely done later, under the Roman empire, not least by the emperor Hadrian and by Greek writers of the 'Second Sophistic' who came from places like Emesa (today's Homs) and Samosata (today flooded by the Atatürk dam) rather than Athens.

In the following chapters, the author treads a thin line between highly theorised approaches to modern Greek nation-building, particularly those by Stathis Gourgouris and Vangelis Calotychos, and the fact-packed narrative histories currently available from several academic presses. While more readable than the former, her account has necessarily to be very selective and is not as reliable as the latter. Her account of the 'colonisation' of Greek space by travellers between the mid-17<sup>th</sup> and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century would have benefited from reference to Nasia Yakovaki, *Ευρώπη μέσω Ελλάδας: μια καμπή στην ευρωπαϊκή αυτοσυνείδηση, 17<sup>ος</sup>–18<sup>ος</sup> αιώνας* [Europe via Greece: A turning-point in European self-consciousness] (Athens: Estia, 2006), which argues in detail that it was western Europeans who constructed a new version of ancient Greece in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a mirror for an emerging concept of Europe during the Enlightenment.

It is misleading to present the very different ideas of Rigas of Velestino and Adamantios Korais, intellectual precursors of Greek statehood, in the sequence of their birth (ch. 4). Korais, although older, only entered the fray on the death of Rigas,

whose ideas then became quickly eclipsed by his own. In the same chapter, a couple of pages on the notorious Greek language question could have been made clearer by reference to Peter Mackridge, *Language and national identity in Greece: 1766–1976* (Oxford University Press, 2009). And there is a serious misunderstanding about the return to democracy in 1974 (ch. 6). The choice in the referendum held in December of that year was not whether or not to restore *democracy* but whether to retain the monarchy or create a *republic*. The confusion arises in part because the Greek word for both is the same. But no reader should be left to suppose that anyone in 1974 voted against democracy, which had already been restored in the general election held three weeks earlier.

Hanink is not the first to challenge the supremacy of the ‘classical ideal’ by arguing that the ancients were not quite everything they have been made out to be. She gives space to the ‘Black Athena’ controversy of the 1980s and 1990s. But Thomas Hope (the anonymous author of the novel *Anastasius*, published in 1819), the historian William Mitford, whose four volumes appeared between 1784 and 1818 and accompanied Lord Byron to Greece, and indeed Byron himself, had all expressed similar views, at a time before the study of the Greco-Roman ‘classics’ had come to be canonised as ‘Classics’. Seen against that background, Joanna Hanink’s book becomes an important contribution to Classical Reception studies. Not all receptions have to be always and uniformly benign, or factually well-grounded. What is important is the impact they have had. And nobody can doubt the formative role of what we nowadays call ‘Classical Reception’ in the birth and growth of Greece as a modern nation-state since the 1820s.

It is not the actual nature or achievement of classical civilisation that is stake here, but the *uses* to which that achievement has been put in modern times. As the author puts it, ‘Anyone who accepts the premise that Greece is a “failure” today should probably also concede that it is largely the failure of a host of old philhellenic ideals’ (p. 199). Perhaps the most appropriate metaphor is not that of debt but of investment. This book very effectively demonstrates the extent to which a European ideal self-image has been *invested*, over the last two centuries and more, in the creation of Greece as a modern project. Too much, surely, for that project to be allowed to fail?

And what hope does that leave for the Greeks? Though she speaks, at one point, of the ‘overdue death’ of the classical ideal in Greece (p. 31), Hanink has nothing to suggest, beyond the evidence of comedy and satire, for what might replace it and liberate crisis-hit Greece from its ‘prison’. But then, so far as I know, neither has anyone else.

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